

## **Study: Washington among top states for increases to education spending**

By John Higgins, The Seattle Times

Published: December 23, 2015, 9:35 AM

The state has pumped nearly \$5 billion into K-12 education since 2012, when the state Supreme Court ruled in its McCleary decision that Washington isn't meeting its constitutional obligation to amply fund schools.

That's what Attorney General Bob Ferguson reported to the Supreme Court at the end of the 2015 Legislative session, noting that the two-year budget for K-12 education increased from about \$13 billion to \$18 billion since 2012.

But much of that effort has gone toward recovering from the global financial crisis in 2008, according to a report this month from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities in Washington, D.C.

Most states, including Washington, were still providing less money per student for K-12 education in the 2014 school year than they did before the Great Recession, which led to deep revenue shortages and spending cuts, according to the report.

Washington lost ground during the recession, at least in part, because the Legislature suspended teachers' voter-approved cost-of-living increases in 2008 and kept them frozen for six years. By 2014, the state's total spending was still about 1 percent shy of what it was in 2008 per student after adjusting for inflation, according to the center's report.

The overall picture for that period looks better if local levies are included in the mix because school districts add extra money to what the state provides for basic teacher pay. The combined amount of K-12 spending (state plus local levies) was about 3 percent higher in 2014 than it was in 2008, according to the report.

Washington's new two-year state budget includes a 3 percent cost-of-living increase for teachers and a 1.8 percent temporary bump that disappears in 2017, part of a nearly \$3 billion boost in education spending over the previous biennium.

Without further analysis, the study's authors weren't able to say whether the new two-year budget gets Washington back to pre-recession levels for total state K-12 spending, not counting local levies.

But the state's per-student funding formula (which covers the bulk of expenditures) is 16.5 percent higher this school year than it was in 2008. Only Alaska and North Dakota had bigger increases, according to the report.

So far, Washington hasn't needed a major tax hike to boost education spending.

"Washington has taken the revenue growth that has resulted from the recovering economy and has focused on restoring some of the cuts that were made to schools," said Michael Leachman, one of the report's authors. "There hasn't been a major 1/8 tax increase like there was in Oregon or California and Minnesota and some other states."

But the Legislature still hasn't solved the most expensive and politically contentious problem remaining under the McCleary decision: The state must pick up the full cost of paying teachers a competitive salary, not just a portion of it as it does now.

That's expected to cost \$3.5 billion more than the state is spending now and lawmakers have not yet agreed on how to pay for it. The court has given the state until the 2017-2018 school year to comply.

Last week, Gov. Jay Inslee proposed boosting the state's share of beginning teacher salaries to \$40,000 — a \$4,300-per-year raise for beginning teachers over what is budgeted now for the 2016-17 school year, according to budget documents from the governor's office.

The 2016 Legislative session begins next month.

"They either will have to cut again, which is a problem with the Court, or they will have to raise taxes," said Stephen Nielsen, Assistant Superintendent of the Puget Sound Educational Service District. "No one, regardless of party affiliation, wants to say the T word this year."